Orientis Aura:
Perspectives in Religious Studies

Why the Catholic Church is Committed to Education

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Allow me to start by thanking Bishop Stephen Lee, Chancellor of this University of Saint Joseph (USJ), the Rector, Rev Stephen Morgan, and the other members of the University's General Council, for awarding me the degree of Doctor of Divinity *Honoris Causa*. The award is granted to me personally, but I see it as the recognition of much dedicated teamwork that, over eight critical years, allowed us to consolidate an institution initially dreamt of by Bishop Domingos Lam and set up by the founding Rectors of IIUM[1] and USJ, Professors João Lourenço and Ruben Cabral.

[1] The *Instituto Inter-Universitário de Macau* (IIUM) was set up in 1997 by the Catholic Foundation (created by the Diocese of Macau and the Catholic University of Portugal). Its first Rector was Fr. João Lourenço, OFM. In 2008, its second Rector, Prof. Ruben Cabral, given the rapidly changing circumstances in higher education, in Macau, successfully requested the Government to authorize the transformation IIUM into the University of Saint Joseph.

I would like to take this opportunity to address the question in many peoples' minds, rarely mentioned in public: why does the Catholic Church invest so much time, effort and resources in Education – from primary schools to universities?

· Why, for example, did the Jesuits set up the College of Saint Paul, 432 years ago, just twenty years after the Portuguese were allowed to settle in Macau?

· Why – given that less than 5% of Macau's residents are Christians, let alone Catholics – does the Catholic Church run more than 40+% of the region's primary and secondary school network, plus a Seminary and a University? If the aim is to recruit new members for the Catholic Church and form its clergy, one might be forgiven for considering the endeavour singularly unsuccessful.

The question is not, however, limited to Macau. The Catholic education network is a worldwide enterprise, and the number of its institutions at every level surpasses that of most countries.

To unpack this issue, I would like to step back to the early centuries of Christianity.

Much has been said, this year, about the Council of Nicaea. At the end of November, Pope Leo and Patriarch Bartholomew, with many leaders from other Christian denominations, visited the ruins of an ancient basilica, built to commemorate Christianity's First Ecumenical Council. That great assembly was held, 17 centuries ago, in the beautiful setting of an imperial palace on the shores of Lake Iznik, in modern Türkiye. It convened, at the emperor's request, in May, 325 AD. Constantine had only recently taken control of the whole Roman Empire – centralizing political authority as had not happened for many decades – and was obviously hoping to resolve a dispute that, in the Eastern regions of the Mediterranean, threatened to tear Christian communities apart. The theological issue the Council was called to resolve concerned the precise theological terms in which to define the relation of Jesus – Logos incarnate, according to John's gospel – to divine nature, without jeopardising Biblical monotheism. Something, however, has long intrigued me. Why did Constantine, who was not at that time a baptised Christian, convene all the bishops in the Empire and beyond to tackle this subtle theological question? The

controversy was not new, and he had previously attempted to dealt with it by imperial letter, personally admonishing Alexander and Arius to keep such contentious issues "confined to our own thoughts, and neither hastily produced in public assemblies nor ill-advisedly entrusted to the public ear"[2].

We would be wrong to discard Constantine's interest in the Church as *family matter*. True, his mother was a Christian, and one of his most trusted advisers was Osius, bishop of Cordoba, but Constantine was a brilliant strategist and a hardnosed politician, not guided by sentiment. A year after the Council, he had his second wife and his eldest son put to death for allegedly having an affair. Driving his actions was an overriding conviction, common to so many successful politicians down the ages, and surely fanned by his supporters, that he "was the instrument [God] chose… that the human race, enlightened through me, might be recalled to a proper observance of God's holy laws"[3]. What, however, did Constantine see in Christianity that he felt would further his political "calling"

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[2] Eusebius, *De Vita Constantini*, II, 64-72. Quoted in John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium. The Early Centuries*, Penguin 1990, p. 54.

[3] Eusebius, *De Vita Constantini*, II, 28.

and allow him to restore unity and purpose to the Roman Empire?

The third century had seen some 25 Roman emperors rise and fall in rapid succession. One hundred years of mismanagement, civil strife, badly controlled migration, and repeated waves of disease and famine had left a once proud Empire on the brink of collapse. Finally, at the turn of the century, a capable general, Diocletian (284-305 AD) – future mentor of Constantine –, took control, reformed the shattered State and attempted to reintroduce civic values and customs from Rome's golden age. That helps one to understand why, instigated by his second in command, Galerius, he then unleashed the most violent persecution yet against Christians. But why single out Christians from among the numerous religious movements spreading for centuries throughout the Empire?

What both Diocletian and Constantine saw, in my opinion, but interpreted so differently, was the extensive network of Christian communities, by now covering the Empire from border to border, and beyond. This was no archipelago of autonomous communities, nor was it a monolithic organization. Christianity, at this stage, was something far more subtle: a web of fine silk woven from

what, centuries later, the French writer Charles Peguy would call *la grande Amitié* (the great Friendship, or Kindness). Internally and in their relation to one another, these communities followed norms that restrained them from taking part in the quasi-religious events promoted by the authorities to ensure public order and appease the ever-unpredictable gods[4]. Such events went from theatrical performances – the original *leitourgia*, in Hellenistic culture – to temple services and the 'enthusiasm' with public bloodletting in the circus.

Diocletian and Galerius saw in this widespread restraint a threat to their autocratic rule. Constantine, on the contrary, viewed the network of communities as the mortar on which to lay the bricks of a new social and political order: an Empire that, while still calling itself Roman, would in fact be something different – giving rise, eventually, to an entirely new and self-styled Christian civilization.

[4] *Sed pro arbitrio suo atque ut hisdem erat libitum, ita sibimet leges facerent quas observarent, et per diversa varios populos congregarent* [But at their own discretion and as it pleased them, they make laws for themselves which they observed, and they gathered together different peoples in diverse ways] – Galerius, *Edict of Serdica* (311 AD).

We can, however, go somewhat deeper. From the Christian writer Lactantius (c. 240 – c. 325), and from Eusebius (c. 260-399), Bishop of Caesarea Maritima, contemporaries and unconditional admirers of Constantine, we learn that it was not he but his onetime colleague and rival, Galerius – not a nice man, by all accounts, and given to violent rages –, who suddenly abandoned a lifelong and passionate opposition to Christianity by publishing in Serdica (now Sofia, capital of Bulgaria), in the year 311, an Edict of Toleration that effectively ended all persecution of Christians. Two years later, Constantine and Licinius would sign the better-known Edict of Milan, extending this new freedom of worship to the remaining regions of the Empire. But what caused Galerius to suddenly change his mind? Unlike Constantine, he had always militantly opposed anything Christian. We find the answer in the edict itself. Lactantius tells us that Galerius was dying from some extremely painful form of bowel cancer: "at length, overcome by [these physical] calamities, he was obliged to acknowledge God, and he cried aloud, in the intervals of raging pain, that he would re-edify the Church which he had demolished, and make atonement for his misdeeds"[5]. It is against this background that Galerius publishes his Edict and, in its last sentence, begs the Christians he has

[5] Lactantius, *De mortis persecutorum* (c. 316), ch. 33.

pardoned, "to pray to their God for our health, [the health] of the Republic and their own [health]"[6]. Even in the mind of Galerius, their onetime archenemy, Christians and their God are somehow linked to kindness and care.

Released by Galerius "from the misery of the mines", Christians now returned to their homes. "Long columns of men and women went on their way, singing psalms and hymns of praise to God in the middle of the highways and city squares" – Eusebius tells us –, and fellow citizens "shared our joy at what was happening"[7]. It appears that Christians were, in fact, popular – and this was probably one of the reasons why, in a troubled Empire, the civil authorities saw them as a threat to their hegemony. A few pages further on, we learn from Eusebius why this is. He recalls a sudden outbreak of "pestilence and famine" that swallows "whole families in a few moments".

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[6] *Ibidem*, ch. 34. The Edict is inscribed – in Latin, Bulgarian and Greek – on a plaque in front of St. Sofia Church, (Sofia, Bulgaria). The wording is clearly visible in the photograph included in the *Wikipedia* article. The word we translate as "health" is, in Latin, *salute*; others have translated it as "welfare", or "wellbeing". One would normally translate the Greek *asfáleia*, however, as "security", or "safety".

[7] Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, Book 9.1. Penguin Books Ltd. (Kindle Edition), p. 284.

> "[Then] the fruits of the Christians' limitless enthusiasm and devotion became evident to all. Alone, during this terrible calamity, they proved by visible deeds their sympathy and humanity. All day long some continued without rest to tend the dying and bury the dead […]; others rounded up the huge number who had been reduced to scarecrows all over the city and distributed loaves to them all, so that their praises were sung on every side, and all men glorified the God of the Christians and owned that they alone were pious and truly religious: did not their actions speak for themselves?"[8]

And there we have it, in a nutshell! Christian communities might be seen as a threat to many traditional Roman customs and to the absolute claims of Imperial autocrats, but there was a grudging, and at times overt, admiration for their kindness and care. In the words of the second century *Epistle to Diognetus*: "what the soul is in a body, Christians are in the world".[9]

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[8] Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, Book 9.8. Penguin Books Ltd. (Kindle Edition), p. 291.

[9] *Epistle to Diognetus*, Grapevine Press (Kindle Edition), p. 11.

This was no accident. Loving kindness[10] was the distinguishing feature of Jesus of Nazareth's person and mission. Not just because he was of a sociable or friendly disposition. But because gentleness and care were what he lived and taught. Dangerously so! One has only to read his great parables – the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, or the Last Judgment, for example – to understand that the seven corporal and seven spiritual works of mercy in our Catechism are not optional extras but lie at the very heart of the religious experience that Jesus lived and proposed.[11]

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[10] The Greek term *agápe*, considered by Paul to be the greatest of God's gifts (1 Cor 13), may originally have denoted the loving kindness of a mother for the child in her womb. In the Apostle's mind, however, it probably evoked the Hebrew term *hesed,* or God's covenantal love for his people, namely when he tells the Romans that nothing "can separate us from the *agápes* of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8,39). 1 Jo 4,16 goes a step further and affirms that God himself is love (*Theos agápe estín*).

[11] In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the 14 traditional "works of mercy" are briefly mentioned in paragraphs 2447-2449. The contrast with the relevance attributed to them in the present article would appear to require further justification, were it not for Pope Francis' last encyclical, "*Dilexit nos*. On the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus" (2024), and Pope Leo XIV's first Apostolic Exhortation, "*Dilexi te*. On Love for the Poor" (2025). "The heart of Christ, as the symbol of the deepest and most personal source of his love for us, is the very core of the initial preaching of the Gospel. It stands at the origin of our faith, as the wellspring that refreshes and enlivens our Christian beliefs" (DN, 32)

And so, we return to Nicaea. In his caring for all lies the deepest understanding of who Jesus is, the "logos" who brings light and meaning to all that exists. He did not simply inform us that "God is love!" (I Jo 4,16) but, as the crucified and risen Lord, reveals that loving kindness in which he and the Father are One (cf. Rm 8,31-39).

Caring for the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the sick; learning and listening in hope for a meeting of minds; sowing love for creation, and seeds of forgiveness and peace in times of trouble… are the life-changing experience that flows directly from Jesus' command: "Do this in memory of me!". At the heart of every Eucharistic celebration lies the root cause of the pilgrim hospices, care homes and leprosaria set up by Christian communities; from there rises the passion for truth and education that feeds, clarifies and directs every other work of mercy, and that gave rise: in the Eastern Mediterranean, to the great schools of Alexandria, Antioch and Caesarea; in Western Europe, to the early monastic and cathedral schools, followed by the universities of Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Salamanca and Coimbra. There also lies the reason why Valignano, Ruggieri and Ricci, after shedding the tunnel vision of European political and economic expansion, learned to value the depths of Chinese culture and set in

motion an ongoing dialogue with its peoples based, not on self-, group-, or national -interest, but *On Friendship*[12] and joint care for the wellbeing of all.

[12] Title of Matteo Ricci's landmark book, *On Friendship: One Hundred Maxims for a Chinese Prince* (1599).